

What do homeschoolers, movies, snowshoeing and the Arctic Winter Games have in common?

by Michelle Ostrowski

Many of us, myself included, had high hopes of a winter full of powder for skiing, snowshoeing, and snow machining. Unfortunately 2006 has yet to bring us an abundance of the cold, white, fluffy stuff. Even though the Refuge is still currently closed to snowmachining, and cross-country ski conditions aren't optimal, there is still a lot going on at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters in Soldotna.

This year the Refuge will be hosting snowshoe events for the Arctic Winter Games. The 2.5K, 5K, 7.5K and 10K male and female junior and juvenile races will be held on the headquarters ski trails March 6-10. Seven of the nine contingents have registered for the different snowshoe races. Being a recreational snowshoer, I was interested in finding out more about this event, and I discovered some of the unusual regulations participants must follow. All participants must wear mukluks or moccasins instead of shoes or boots. They also must make their own snowshoes prior to the race. The snowshoes need to weigh at least 2.5 lbs and have a wooden frame with leather or gut webbing. The snowshoe's bindings must be made of soft leather, hide or lampwick and no devices can be affixed to the snowshoes for traction. Duct tape isn't permitted. I hope you find time to come up to the Refuge Visitor Center on Ski Hill Road and watch some of these races during the Games.

For those families who would prefer their entertainment indoors amidst the warmth, we have our normally scheduled weekend movies. We also have a new Winter Explorer program for ages four to nine. Using the visitor center exhibits as references, "explorers" complete a worksheet and then get a keepsake button.

As many of you already know, we opened the

doors to the new Environmental Education Center in fall of 2005. All of our school field trips are now based out of this log cabin. We are almost completely booked for our Wildlife in Winter and Winter Ecology school snowshoeing field trips for grades four through six.

Besides our organized school field trips we have created an exciting new discovery room program for homeschool families. On February 1-3 (Wednesday, Thursday and Friday) we will have the "Warming up to Winter" discovery room set up for homeschool families with children at the K-6 level. Homeschoolers can drop in on any of these days between the hours of 10:00am and 2:00pm. Activities, games, hands on science experiments, and craft projects will be set up for different age levels on various topics including: animal tracks, water properties, snowflakes, winter adaptations, Inuit vocabulary and more.

Any teachers interested in our organized school field trips (there are still a few dates available between February 15 and March 2) or homeschool families interested in our discovery room program February 1-3 are asked to contact Nicole Johnson at 260-2839.

So what do homeschoolers, weekend movies, snowshoeing and the Arctic Winter Games have in common? They are all just a few of the exciting programs and events that are occurring this winter on the top of Ski Hill Road at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters in Soldotna.

Michelle Ostrowski is an interpretive park ranger at the Refuge and has assisted with educational school groups since 1997. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.